



Region One
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

**DECISION NOTICE
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for the
Thompson River Property Acquisition**

April 14, 2020

Description of Proposed Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks proposes to purchase 40-acres on the Thompson River from The Conservation Fund to be managed as an undeveloped, walk-in Fishing Access Site (FAS) approximately five miles east of the city of Thompson Falls. The property contains intact upland and riparian habitat and would provide access to approximately 2,500 feet of river frontage along both banks of the Thompson River. Since 1982, the Thompson River has averaged over 8,000 annual angler days with a maximum of over 13,000 in 2015. The mainstem fishery primarily consists of rainbow and brown trout, but many of the river's intact tributaries provide excellent spawning and rearing habitat for native salmonids. A recent study conducted on the Thompson River verified that bull trout which originate in its tributaries spend a considerable amount of time in the mainstem Thompson River. The lower seven miles of the Thompson River possess the coldest water and provide the best habitat for native fish. A PIT tag antenna near the confluence with the Clark Fork River recently documented bull trout usage of the lower Thompson River during every calendar month of the year. The property is also located close to the Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area, and adjacent to United States Forest Service administered land. It provides excellent wildlife habitat for bighorn sheep, elk, deer and other game and non-game species.

Based on observational data provided by the Montana Natural History Program, 12 sensitive species are found in the vicinity of the proposed property acquisition including westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. Purchase of this property would prevent residential development, which would preserve sensitive fish and wildlife habitat and allow for continued terrestrial wildlife movement.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process and Public Involvement

FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review on March 13, 2020 and asked for public comment through April 13, 2020. FWP ran legal ads describing the proposed project and the availability of the draft EA in the *Sanders County Ledger*, *Clark Fork Valley Press*, *The Missoulian*, and *Helena Independent Record*. FWP also mailed postcards to neighboring landowners. The draft EA was posted on FWP's official website and was also available at the Region One headquarters in Kalispell and online for people with internet access or through internet service at public libraries.

The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

If no action was taken, FWP would not purchase the property. The lots would remain private and closed to public access. The lots would likely be developed with septic systems, dwellings, and roads. Some level of modification to the riparian vegetation would likely occur.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

FWP would acquire forty acres of property along the Thompson River for inclusion in the statewide Fishing Access Site (FAS) system. The new FAS would be day-use only and managed for walk-in access with minimal development. Acquisition of the property by FWP would ensure future public access and resource protection and would preclude private development that would likely include roads, residences, septic systems, and other disturbances that could negatively impact this important aquatic and recreational resource. The existing roadbed between the highway and the river would be closed to vehicle traffic and parking would be restricted to the pull-out area upstream of the property.

Summary of Public Comment

FWP received 13 public comments on the proposed acquisition including from adjacent landowners, county commissioners, hunting/fishing groups, and individual local anglers. All were generally supportive. Below is a summary of concerns raised and FWP's response:

- One concern was that a parking area may need to be developed in the future.

FWP Response: Currently, FWP believes the existing parking areas at pull-outs adjacent to the property will have enough capacity to handle expected use. If it is determined in the future that more parking is needed, a separate environmental assessment will be conducted for that project.

- Two commenters were supportive of this purchase but noted that the property downstream near the confluence with the Clark Fork River should also be purchased or would be a better access.

FWP Response: The property downstream would be a great piece of property to protect from development and provide access. If it ever becomes available for sale, FWP will pursue it.

- A third concern was that the price seemed high and the land wasn't developable.

FWP Response: During preliminary investigations, an appraisal was conducted on the property. As part of that, an engineer determined that both lots had enough space to develop homes and septic units. That raised the value of the property and the need for conservation.

- A fourth concern were the existing easements on the property.

FWP Response: There are currently easements on the property including powerline and abandoned petroleum pipeline. These will remain in place but will not restrict access or further prevent conservation.

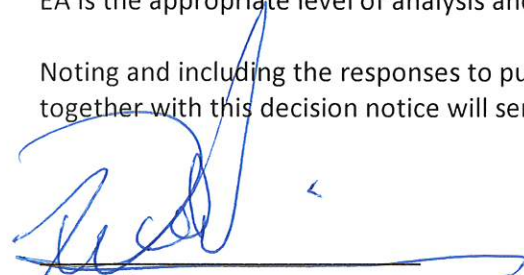
- Finally, it was recently brought to FWP's attention that an existing covenant on the subdivision prohibits the discharge of firearms on the property. Because of this covenant, the relatively small size of the property, and adjacent private lots, FWP has determined that the property will be best suited as an "archery hunting only" area. This would be consistent with the management of other small Fishing Access Sites which may not allow hunting at all.

FWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision

In reviewing all the public comment and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the purchase of 40 acres on the lower Thompson River as proposed in the Alternative B, the Proposed Action. The property would be open to walk-in public activities such as angling, bird watching, and archery hunting.

Through the public review process described above, the public raised some concerns with the project, but all concerns were either addressed in the EA or did not directly apply to this project. FWP found no significant impacts on the human or physical environments associated with this proposal; therefore, the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and an environmental impact statement is not required.

Noting and including the responses to public comments, the draft EA will become the final EA and together with this decision notice will serve as the final documents for this proposal.



Jim Williams
Region One Supervisor

4/22/20
Date